



Researching Children's Rights in the Digital Age

Global Kids Online

It is becoming difficult to imagine a day in a teenagers' life – in all parts of the globe – without internet access: to socialize with peers, seek information, watch videos, post photos and news updates or play games. As the internet rapidly penetrates all regions, children's experiences worldwide are increasingly informed by their use of information and communication technologies. This advance in technology presents challenges for safeguarding children's rights, as their use of digital devices often precedes an effective rights framework and is outpacing legislation and regulation. Furthermore, while digital engagement is rapidly spreading throughout the world, this fast-paced growth often occurs far ahead of any understanding of what constitutes safe and positive use in digital contexts.

The [International Telecommunication Union](#) (ITU) estimates that by the end of 2015, 3.2 billion people will be using the internet, 2 billion of whom will be in developing countries. This exponential growth is largely attributable to the rapid spread of mobile broadband technology, reaching close to 70 per cent of the total world population. What implications does this have for children worldwide? We may see more and more children in lower income countries going online and more children accessing the internet through 'mobile first'. We may see a digital divide growing not only between those who have access to the internet and those who do not, but also between generations: parents/grandparents/caregivers and children. We may see some children's educational experiences being enhanced by access to the internet, but we may also see more children at risk of negative experiences because they lack guidance, support and mediation from their parents and educators who have not yet caught up with the fast pace of internet development.

This has led to growing concern by child rights organizations, regulators, the private sector and other stakeholders that children's rights need to be realised online as well as offline. In order to do so, it is imperative that the conditions under which young users live and the ways in which they use the internet are considered when designing and distributing online technologies, networks and services. Although evidence from the global North shows how the risks and opportunities of internet use are impacting on children's well-being and the realisation of their rights, there is a lack of robust evidence from lower income countries even though this is where we are likely to see most of the future growth in the population of young internet users.¹ Where research exists, there are major challenges related to comparability of findings across countries and contexts due to the use of different samples, measures and methods.

This research project aims to facilitate cross-national research in the global South by providing the tools to generate and sustain a rigorous evidence base. The scale of such a task is beyond the capacity of any single research institution, nor would it be appropriate for one institution to conduct research across such diverse contexts. What is needed instead is a research toolkit which encompasses the common elements but also allows for local and participatory adaptation or development.

With this in mind, Global Kids Online was created as an international research partnership, drawing on and expanding the achievements of the [EU Kids Online](#) network – an innovative cross-national initiative funded by the European Commission's Better Internet for Kids (originally, Safer Internet) Programme. With Professor Sonia Livingstone from the London School of Economics and Jasmina Byrne from the UNICEF Office of

¹ For recent international reports, see [UNICEF Office of Research Innocenti](#) (2012), [International Telecommunications Union](#) (2013), [EU Kids Online](#) (2011 and 2014) and [Family Online Safety Institute](#) (2011).



Research as principal investigators, the project involves collaboration with a number of researchers and experts from different countries. The purpose is to gather evidence to understand whether and how children's rights are being enhanced or undermined in the digital age as well as to inform policy makers and stakeholders nationally and internationally. UNICEF's global presence facilitates this multi-national partnership by enabling the project to conduct research across multiple contexts.

The project aims for a balanced approach which focuses not only on the risks that children encounter on the internet, but also on the opportunities for social connectedness, entertainment, learning, participation, creativity, and expression of identity. To accomplish this, we adopt a bottom-up research approach that focuses primarily on children's own experiences. The specific goals of the project are to:

Develop a research toolkit consisting of a modular survey, qualitative research protocols and methodological guidelines

Specifically, the toolkit will contain:

- a modular survey questionnaire comprising compulsory modules, optional modules and guidance for construction of additional modules;
- methodological guidelines developed by commissioned experts;
- a short version of the questionnaire with only compulsory modules ('essential indicators') that can be incorporated into other surveys;
- qualitative guidelines and tools for modifying the toolkit according to particular country contexts or needs, to ensure cross-national sensitivity.

Produce national reports from four participating countries and a synthesis report

The project initially facilitates research in four countries (Argentina, the Philippines, Serbia, and South Africa). The research is conducted by UNICEF Country Offices in partnership with national academic institutions, with the UNICEF Office of Research as global coordinator. Each country will produce a national report with results from quantitative and qualitative research on the risks and opportunities of children's internet use, supported by the toolkit. A synthesis report will be developed that summarizes the research process, highlights key lessons and expands on the practical outcomes of the implementation and evaluation of the toolkit.

Develop a website for hosting the toolkit, national reports and a synthesis report

The research project will run until June 2016 when the toolkit and reports will be shared publically through an open access website. Following the first stage, participation by other interested countries will be contingent on meeting a set of requirements, with the intention of preserving the integrity of the research framework and ensuring comparability of data. We hope that this work will inspire researchers and practitioners to generate more knowledge that will support global policy efforts relating to children's rights in the digital age.

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